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ARMENIAN MONUMENTS AND TEXTILE ARTS OF SMYRNA

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This essay will consider the art-historical evidence for the Armenian community of Smyrna.[1] It is concerned with the modern period, despite the presence of Armenians in the city since at least the fourteenth century.[2] Two areas of material culture, considered below, nevertheless offer insight into the prosperous and cosmopolitan character of the Armenian Smyrna before the Genocide and the Great Fire of 1922. The first comprises the monuments of the Armenian quarter, including the cathedral, other churches, and educational institutions. Although the monuments do not survive, numerous old photographs offer insight into the architectural character of the Armenian quarter.[3] The second category of evidence is exemplified in a collection of textiles, including clothing, linens and needlework which belonged to an Armenian family of Smyrna and which was donated to the Armenian Library and Museum of America (ALMA) in Watertown, Massachusetts. The following pages present the reader with a brief and partial inven-

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[1] I wish to thank the Armenian Library and Museum of America for making their collection available to me. I am particularly grateful to Susan Lind-Sinanian, curator of textiles, for her generous and gracious assistance in the preparation of this essay. All errors are my own.

[2] See especially Raymond H. Kévorkian and Paul B. Paboudjian: *Les Arméniens dans l'Empire Ottoman à la veille du génocide* (Paris: Les Editions d'Art et d'Histoire ARHIS, 1992). The section on the *vilayet* of Smyrna (Aidin) offers an invaluable introduction to the Armenian community of Smyrna and its history. The volume is equally important for its collection of early photographs of the Armenian quarter and its monuments.

[3] In addition to the work of Kévorkian and Papoudjian, one may find an up-to-date listing of the churches of Smyrna, including photographs and basic information on the Roman Catholic, Greek, Armenian (Apostolic and Protestant), Anglican, and Protestant institutions, at the following website: www.levantineheritage.com/data10.htm.

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tory of the monuments and objects; it is hoped that these works, and others, will be the subject of close and individual study by future scholars.

The cathedral of the community lay in the Armenian quarter in the eastern portion of the city. Dedicated to Saint Stephen (Surb Stepanos), it was constructed in the seventeenth century and attests to the size and wealth of the Armenian community at that time. The end of the sixteenth century and the early seventeenth century witnessed a surge in the Armenian population of Smyrna; historical accounts record that 8,000 Armenians then lived in the city.[4] At this time, too, Armenians of Smyrna played a dynamic role in international commerce and were involved in the trade of silk with Iran, India, and China. After the initial construction of the cathedral, it was restored three times: first in 1688, after an earthquake, again in 1743, and finally after a sweeping fire in 1845.[5]

Situated at the westernmost portion of the Armenian quarter and adjacent to buildings of the episcopal complex, the monument rose well above surrounding structures, its light-colored hemispherical dome and drum easily recognizable in the skyline (Fig. 1). Although to my knowledge no ground plans of the church were recorded, the layout may be discerned from close inspection of interior and exterior views. It is a centralized plan dominated by the space of the dome, from which radiate four arms in the shape of a cross (Fig. 2). The major axis, running west to east, appears longer, suggesting the form of a domed basilica. Photographs of the nave and sanctuary show the great height of the building; the vaults, which form the covering of the cross arms, spring from extremely tall supports, whose shape further accentuates their height (Fig. 3). They are formed of three distinct levels: the main level, closest to the ground, takes the shape of a cylindrical column shaft topped by composite capitals. Resting on these columns is a thicker pier, square in plan, and bearing painted decoration. Above a short capital rises a final level, again taking the form of a square pier. From this stacked support rise very shallow barrel vaults. The resulting effect is of vertiginous height, as the supports appear much more massive on the top than the bottom. At the same time, the choice of supports must have generated a strong sense of spatial coherence, as the narrow shafts hardly interrupt a unified view of the interior. The

[4] Kévorkian and Paboudjian, *Les Arméniens*, p. 161.
[5] Ibid.

photographic evidence, moreover, reveals the lavish character of the space. Below the vaults, which are accented with polychrome, hang numerous chandeliers. Indeed, the photographs suggest that one chandelier appears in each intercolumniation of the nave. The altar is separated from the area of the laity by a low, decorated barrier which projects in a semi-circle into the nave (Fig. 4). Beyond this space, the altar itself rises at least five steps higher than the nave, and is adorned with an elaborate architectural framework of columns, capitals, and a rich entablature. The extravagance of this space surely offers some indication of the affluence that the Armenian community of Smyrna once enjoyed. It is likely that the altar furnishings were financed, at least in part, by wealthy members of the congregation.

The exterior architecture is equally impressive. One early photograph reveals a large, two-storied portal connecting the cathedral to an inner courtyard (Fig. 5). To the sides of this portal runs an arcaded portico, covered with groin vaults suspended on columns with composite capitals. A tall bell-tower stands next to the cathedral complex (See Fig. 2). Rising in three distinct stories, it is decorated with the same neoclassical vocabulary visible elsewhere on the monument. Corner pilasters articulate each of the three levels and are topped with capitals of increasingly detailed ornament. Dominating the cathedral and the quarter, however, is the massive dome. The structure follows the architectural traditions of neoclassical architecture known from Ottoman Turkey and Greece. The shallow, ribbed dome with a scalloped perimeter rises from a circular drum, which is pierced with windows decorated with semicircular arches and framed by pilasters.

Early photographs of the cathedral reveal the affluence of the community in other ways, too. One noteworthy feature of both interior and exterior is the excellent physical condition of the structure. An early view of the superstructure of the cathedral is instructive in this respect. Careful inspection of the image reveals that the ceramic tiles covering the roofs of the cross arms and the porticoes are in pristine condition—and probably a feature of a restoration to the church (See Fig. 2).

In many ways, Surb Stepanos finds analogues in the churches of the Greek Orthodox community of Smyrna. The stacked supports, with a lower cylindrical level and the square, elongated pier-like impost, are also employed at the Church of Aghios Ioannis Prodromos (Kerasochoras), built before 1818 and rebuilt in 1856-57, and almost

entirely destroyed in the fire of 1922.[6] The Church of Aghia Ekaterini, built in 1898 (also destroyed) featured a hemispherical dome at the juncture of a long east-west axis and a very short north-south arm.[7] The hemispherical dome was used at many churches of the Greek Orthodox community of Smyrna, unsurprising given the importance of this form in the context of Byzantine architecture. It is noteworthy, however, that it is also used in the case of the Armenian Cathedral. Elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire, one could find Armenian churches of the early modern period constructed with the tall cylindrical drum and conical roof traditional of medieval Transcaucasia.[8] While the realities of architectural finance and construction in Smyrna may not be known, the common architectural profiles of the Greek Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic churches convey a sense of shared Christian identity within an Ottoman city.

Early photographs also preserve evidence for the educational institutions of Smyrna Armenians. The Mesropian School for Boys, like the church, is executed in a neoclassical style (Fig. 6). The broad smooth planes of the structure are opened with generous and regular fenestration flanked by pilasters, and the corners of the structure are accented with long and short quoins (cornerstones). The school for young women, dedicated to Saint Hripsime, is similar in style (Fig. 7). There, the facades are designed in a grid of vertical pilasters and horizontal stringcourses, each unit enclosing a large window. The structure is two-storied, with a row of arched windows on the first level and rectangular windows on the second. Both schools appear large, and their formal style, characterized by regular and sober exteriors, conveys the sense of a confident and affluent community, a sense that is also suggested by photographs of the students themselves (Fig. 8).[9]

While the cathedral and educational institutions of Smyrna shed light on the public character of the Armenian community, instructive, too, are objects from the domestic realm. The Armenian Library and Museum of America preserves a collection of textiles belonging to Ruhama Yeranian (1900-2003), the longest living member of a family of five unmarried sisters from Smyrna. Her father was an Armenian merchant who traveled extensively throughout Anatolia. Her mother

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[6] www.levantineheritage.com/data10.htm. Web 23 September 2011.

[7] Ibid.

[8] See, for example, the cupola surmounting the Church of the Virgin (Astvatsatsin) at Arabkir, in Kévorkian and Paboudjian, *Les Arméniens*, p. 375.

[9] Ibid., p. 165, fig. 262.

was Greek and originally from Smyrna. The family's domestic furnishings and garments are featured in the ALMA collection, offering insight into the ways in which members of the community dressed themselves and decorated their homes, and so reveals something of the daily life of Armenians in the city.

Among the objects in the collection is a large knotted pile rug pillow, executed in the Persian style, in bright colors and geometric designs (Fig. 9). Such pillows were often used to cushion the backs of benches, as this example may have done. Seating itself was also often covered, and in the Yeranian collection are two examples of textiles used either to cover seating or bedding. The first is bright red and around two feet long, with interlaced Marash embroidery in yellow (Fig. 10). The second, a bed cover, also uses Marash interlacing stitch and some chain stitching, a technique also typical of Marash embroideries. That these textiles may have been produced in Marash is interesting; it is tempting to imagine that they were brought back to Smyrna by the Yeranian father during his travels as a merchant.

Ruhama Yeranian also donated to ALMA a collection of towels and lace doilies, some of which are extremely fine. Among them are four small doilies (Fig. 11) and a large knotted-needle lace doily, cream-colored and some fourteen inches in diameter, featuring a variety of typical stitches (Fig. 12). The Yeranian family also owned a collection of embroidered towels. One towel is double-sided and features a striking pattern of stylized trees, pomegranates, and possibly vessels with plantings (Fig. 13). Another, also double-sided, uses a variety of colored threads, and is patterned with flowers and geometric motifs.

It is not inconceivable that such towels were in fact embroidered by one of Yeranian daughters herself. Embroidery was a particularly common pre-modern domestic pastime, and it is known that the mother of the Yeranian family taught her daughters both Greek and Armenian needle arts. Yet such items were also produced by female laborers and sold on the market. In either case, these pieces offer insight into the kinds of textile arts that were used and appreciated by the Armenians of Smyrna.

The ALMA collection also features numerous articles of clothing belonging to the Yeranian family. One striking item is a drawstring purse of blue velveteen (Fig. 14). Gold threads are stitched onto the surface of the purse in the style known as *dival*, which was quite commonly used in the Ottoman Turkey, especially in the vicinity of Constantinople. It is an involved technique, requiring the construction of a

cutout design of cardboard or cocoons glued to the fabric, over which is sewn the embroidery.[10] In the case of the Yeranian purse, various kinds of gold thread, as well as small sequins, create a beautiful and sumptuous sculptural relief over the dark blue surface. Sequins are also suspended from metallic gold threads fringing the edges of the purse.

The collection also includes an embroidered silk scarf, decorated with pulled thread and drawn work in the tradition of Aintab. The large size of the scarf is demonstrated by its location, as of this writing, on a display mannequin in the ALMA galleries (Fig. 15). A detail of the scarf edge reveals the exquisite craftsmanship (Fig. 16). This scarf was accompanied by a sash, also embroidered, with three rows of stylized forms (perhaps vessels?) on a cream-colored background punctuated by dark sequins (Fig. 17). The major motifs are enlivened with orange and yellow threads, stitched in the Turkish technique known as *mushabak*. As a detail of the scarf reveals, the *mushabak* stitch involved the counting of the fabric threads in order to fill large areas of cloth with diagonal lines of color (Fig. 18).[11]

Such scarves and sashes were worn by the fashionable women of Smyrna, as elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire. This is attested in the nineteenth-century lithographs of B. Tatikian, in which young women of Smyrna wear brightly-colored scarves wrapped around the head, and sashes girdling the waist. Similar costume is worn by the women of mid-nineteenth-century Smyrna as depicted in the works of Camille Rogier.[12]

This brief and piecemeal survey offers, it is hoped, a sense of the prosperity of the Armenian community of Smyrna before the tragedies of the early twentieth century. Considering the impressive size and decoration of the cathedral, and the quality and beauty of surviving domestic furnishings and clothing, the material evidence suggests confidence and cosmopolitanism, and thus offers precious visual affirmation of the historical record.

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[10] A very useful introduction to embroidery in the Ottoman world may be found in Sumru Belger Krody, *Flowers of Silk and Gold: Four Centuries of Ottoman Embroidery* (Washington, DC: Textile Museum, 2000). For the dival method in particular, see pp. 40-45.

[11] Gülseren Ramazanoğlu, *Turkish Embroidery* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1976), p. 32.

[12] An aquarelle of 1843 by Rogier depicts a resident of Smyrna shown in just these items, with a silk scarf around her neck and a red sash at her waist.

Fig. 1. Smyrna: View of the Armenian Quarter

Fig. 2. Surb Stepanos Armenian Cathedral: External View

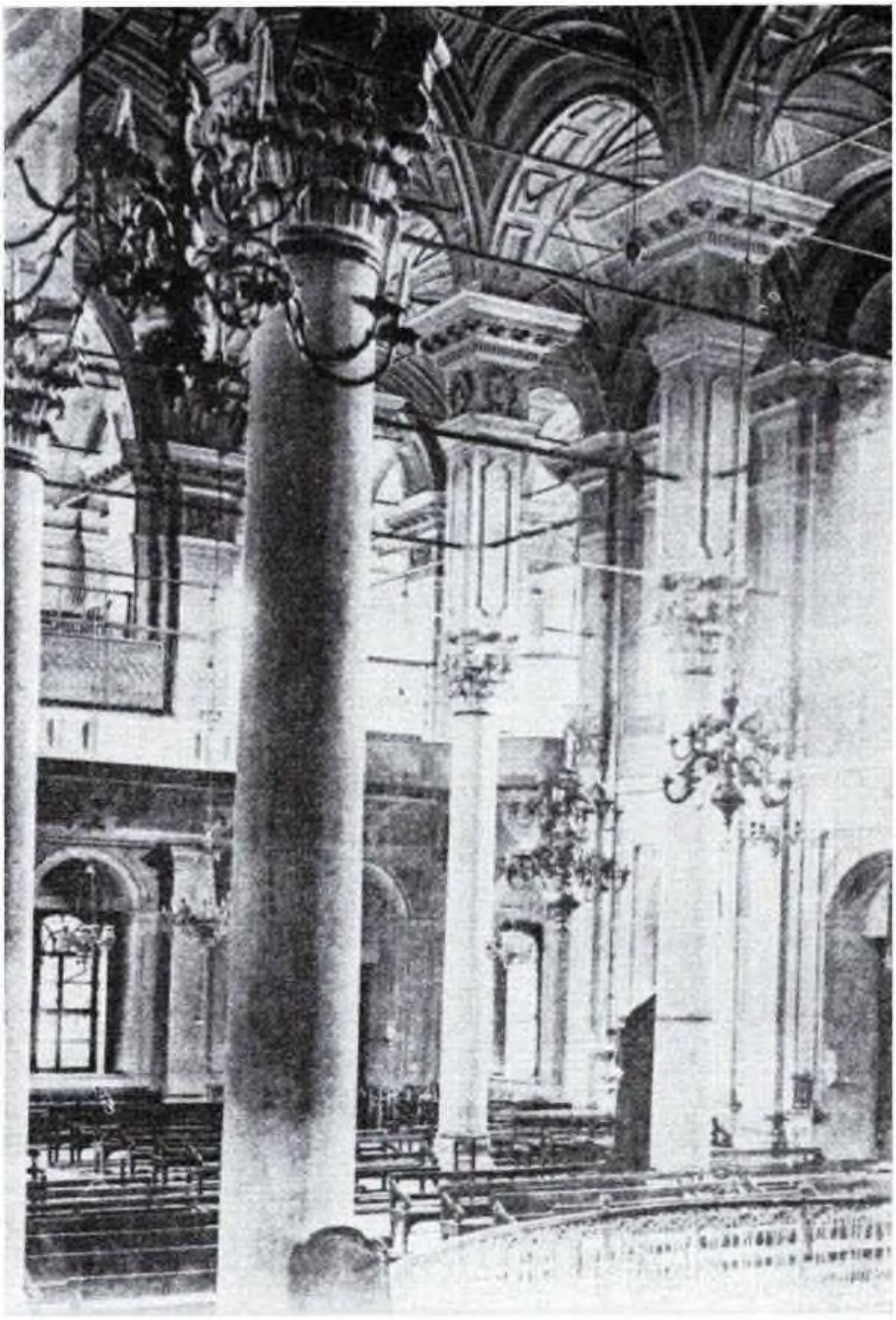

Fig. 3. Armenian Cathedral: Interior

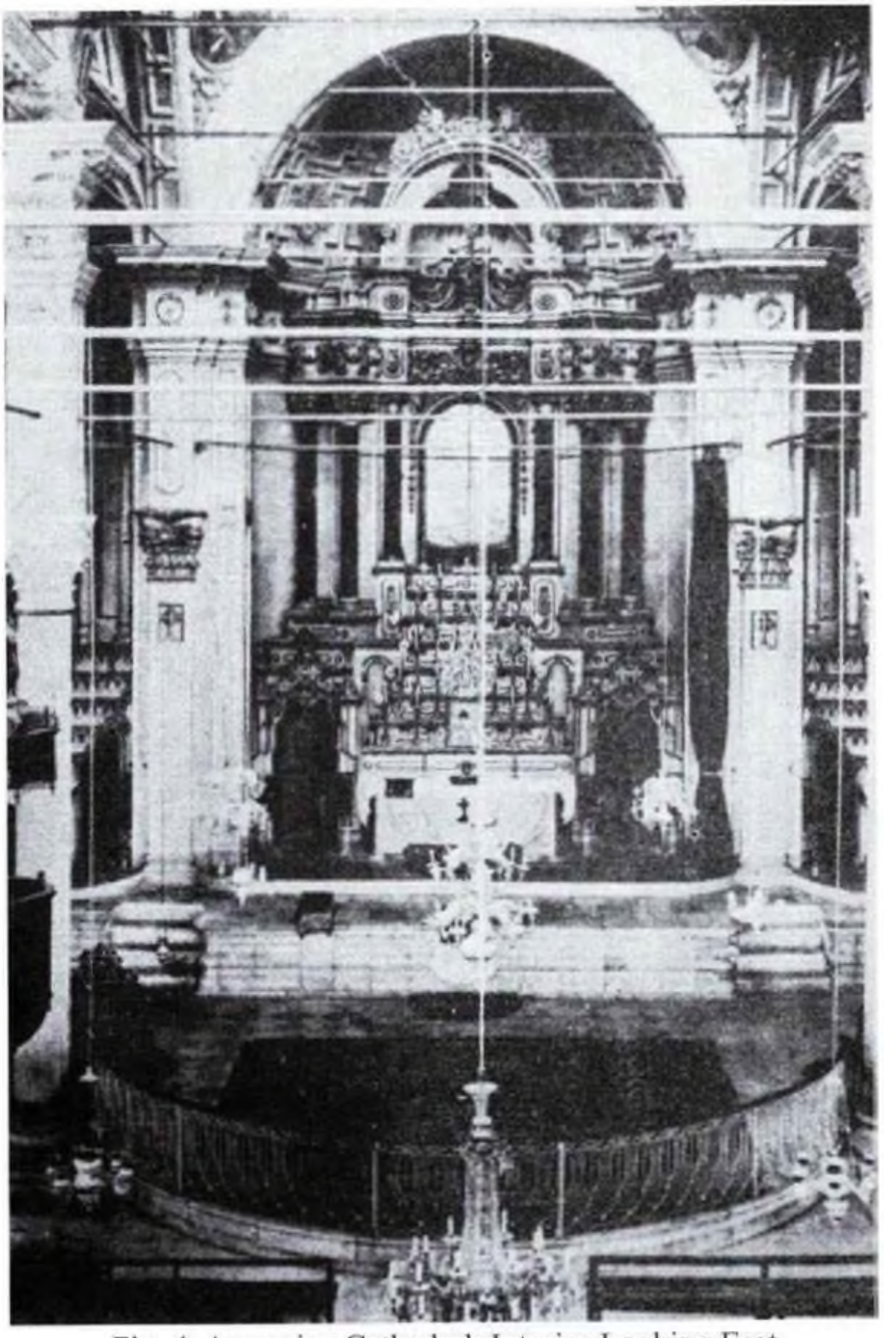

Fig. 4. Armenian Cathedral: Interior Looking East

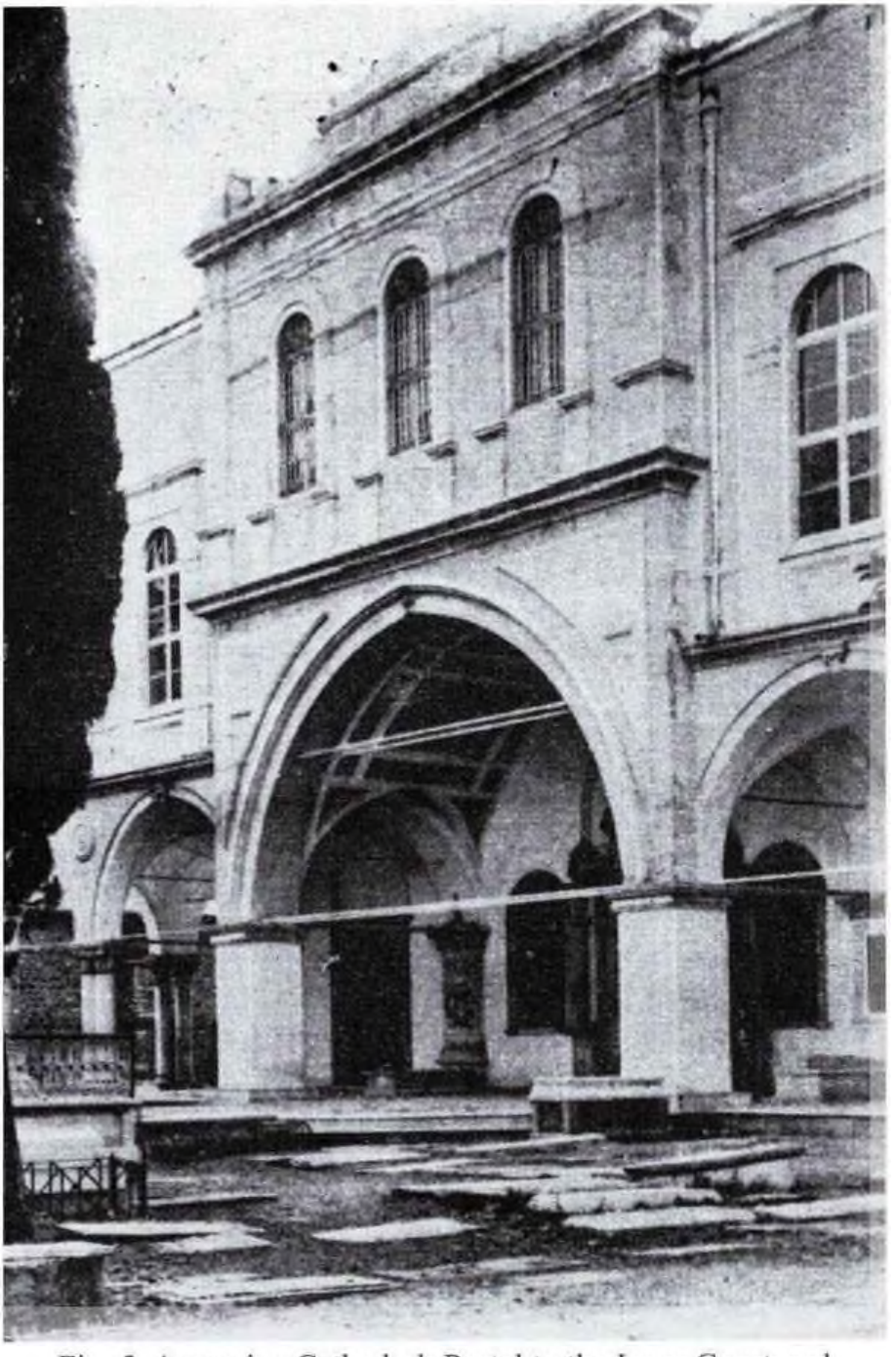

Fig. 5. Armenian Cathedral: Portal to the Inner Courtyard

Fig. 6. Mesropian School for Boys

Fig. 7. Hirpsimian School for Girls

Fig. 8. Mesropian School: Graduating Class

Fig. 9. Rug Pillow (Armenian Library and Museum of America)

Fig. 10. Seat or Bed Cover

Fig. 11. Small Lace Doily

Fig. 12. Large Lace Doily

Fig. 13. Embroidered Towel

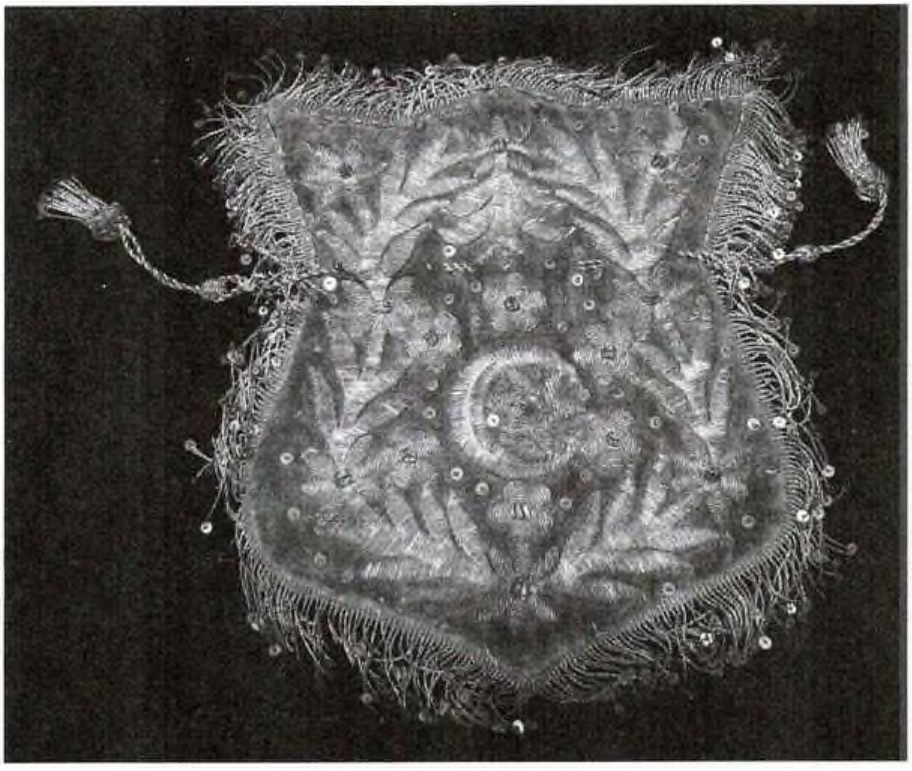

Fig. 14. Velveteen Purse

Fig. 15. Silk Scarf, on Mannequin

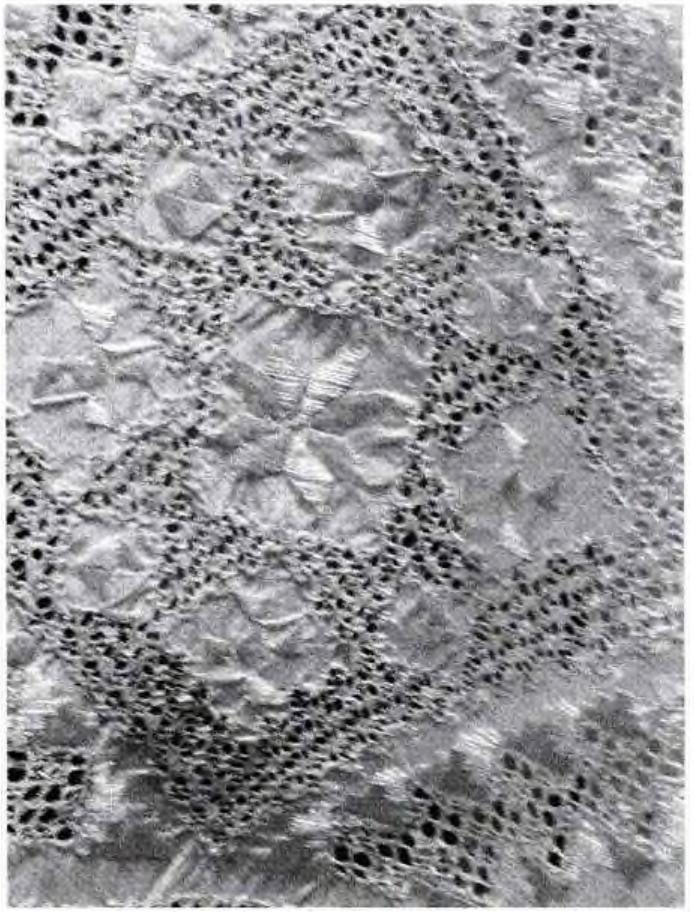

Fig 16. Silk Scarf, Detail

Fig. 17. Embroidered Sash

Fig. 18. Detail of Sash